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DEPARTMENT FOR WHA A/S SHANNON AND WHA/CAR (BENT)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2/27/16
TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR SOCI JM
SUBJECT: PORTIA SIMPSON MILLER WINS PNP RACE TO SUCCEED
PRIME MINISTER PATTERSON

REF: A. KINGSTON 0230

1B. KINGSTON 2642

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Thomas C. Tighe. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) On February 25 Peoples National Party (PNP) delegates elected Portia Simpson Miller to succeed P.J. Patterson as party president and Prime Minister (the latter subject to the expected confirmation by the PNP parliamentary majority, followed by ratification by the Governor General). Patterson, who is to step down by April 1, announced the results to raucous PNP crowd on the evening of February 25. Simpson Miller outpolled National Security Minister Peter Phillips with 1,775 votes to his 1,538, and both easily outdistanced Finance Minister Omar Davies (283), and former Water and Housing Minister Karl Blythe (204). The losing candidates publicly accepted the results, but it remains to be seen which, if any, will be offered seats in her Cabinet. Post has long enjoyed good relations with Simpson Miller, who has never held a front-line ministry in her long political career. We do have some concerns about some well-placed officials in her campaign, however, and will report further on these issues septel. End Summary.

Portia Simpson Miller: Presumptive Next Prime Minister

12. (U) Portia Simpson Miller won the February 25 vote among nearly 4000 voting delegates of the governing Peoples National Party (PNP), becoming only the fourth president of the PNP in its 68-year history, and the first female to head the party. More importantly, Simpson Miller, currently the Minister of Local Government, Community and Sport, now becomes the presumptive next prime minister, subject to confirmation by the PNP majority in Parliament and by the Governor General, when Prime Minister P.J. Patterson steps down as expected by April 1. As expected, it turned out to be a contest between Simpson Miller and Phillips. Both camps exuded confidence heading into Saturday, but Simpson Miller, her backers, a highly respected veteran Jamaican pollster, and numerous talk-show pundits and columnists had all predicted that she would prevail, absent skulduggery. For his part, Phillips appeared to be somewhat shell-shocked when he conceded the election.

¶ 13. (U) Patterson announced the results in the early evening, and Simpson Miller's three rivals - National Security Minister Peter Phillips, Finance Minister Omar Davies, and former Housing and Water Minister Karl Blythe - all publicly accepted the results. Of the 3890 delegates on the list, 3808 cast ballots (of which, 8 were reported "spoiled", or invalid). Simpson Miller tallied 1,775 votes (46.7 percent), followed by Phillips with 1,538 (40.5 percent), Davies with 283 votes (7.4 percent), and Blythe with 204 votes (5.4 percent). The day's voting, which took place at Phillips' alma mater, Kingston College, went smoothly, although there were reports of a few delegates complaining that they were wrongly blocked from voting. Minor turmoil erupted when a local radio station announced during the day that Blythe had agreed to throw his support to Simpson Miller; an agitated Blythe strongly denied the reports.

¶ 14. (U) Danville Walker, the respected head of the non-partisan Electoral Office of Jamaica (EOJ), which oversaw the PNP election, pronounced that the election had been fair, with only a few minor glitches. Opposition Leader Bruce Golding publicly offered his "heartiest congratulations," adding that he looked forward to engaging Simpson Miller on policy matters. Charge telephoned Simpson Miller on February 27 to congratulate her on her victory and to state that we look forward to working with her.

¶ 15. (U) The popular and populist Simpson Miller's decision to skip the only planned debate between the candidates (Ref A) did not hurt her in the end. Though her campaign vigorously denied that she was dodging her opponents out of fear of being shown up on television/radio, many observers still remember her less-than-stellar debate performance against P.J. Patterson when she challenged him unsuccessfully for the top job in 1992. In a country of 2.6 million, Saturday's voting pool was a small one, although Simpson Miller is

almost universally acknowledged to be the most popular politician of either party in Jamaica. The sole contestant in the race from humble origins (and the only one lacking an advanced degree in a country where many rate titles above competence), she enjoys a genuine rapport with many Jamaicans from the poorer strata.

¶ 16. (U) The just-concluded campaign highlighted unfortunate aspects of Jamaica's class and color biases - one prominent local columnist who has long and vigorously backed Simpson Miller recently wrote that one prominent PNP member had described Simpson Miller as only being fit to be his maid. Prickly Foreign Minister K.D. Knight, a respected lawyer who served as Phillips' campaign manager and who has repeatedly questioned Simpson Miller's intellect and ability, was rebuked by Patterson, who was anxious that the contest not lead to irreparable damage to the party before the next general election. In airing his views, Knight was obviously attempting to discredit Simpson Miller's candidacy. Although he had voiced the types of criticisms of Simpson Miller frequently expressed privately by many middle- and upper-class Jamaicans, however, he may unwittingly have damaged Phillips' efforts to attract support among the island's poorer majority who resented his comments.

Comment

¶ 17. (C) Simpson Miller has a long history in the PNP, and has been a Member of Parliament since 1976. She has always made herself available to current and former U.S. ambassadors and emboffs, towards whom she has been unfailingly courteous. That said, while Simpson Miller has held a number of ministerial portfolios since she entered Parliament, she has never run a "front-line ministry" such as Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, Finance, or National Security, and she has avoided expressing specific views on many policy issues of interest to the USG. Knight and other critics contend that she lacks the sophistication to handle such material. Only time will tell, and much will depend on whom Simpson Miller

appoints to her Cabinet and to senior advisory positions. As noted reftel, however, of more immediate concern are some of the individuals behind Simpson Miller's candidacy with known or suspected criminal backgrounds and/or associations. Septel will address those issues in greater detail.

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